

**B**efore there even were cars, steamboats raced for prestige and profit; and many of the pioneers of internal combustion tested their new inventions on rivers as well as roads. Marine competition may well be the oldest form of motorsport—and while it's been battered lately by a leaky economy, it is still very much afloat and steering a steady course.

"Hydroplane racing has been around for over 100 years," noted Mark Sharley, of the Unlimited Light Hydroplane Racing Association (ULHRA) in Issaquah, Washington. "It's not just a competition, it's a spectacle, with brightly painted, fast racing craft kicking up tons of water in 'roostertails' behind them—while cov-

ering the length of a football field in just over a second. The racing is close to the fans, so they can see and feel the awesome power." Further, "our hydroplanes use the same engines that are in cars—the same spark plugs, the same electronic components, lubricants, etc. The primary difference is that we race with one propeller on water, rather than four tires on land."

"The performance marine industry continues to grow," added Jesse Powell, of Aeromotive Fuel Systems in Lenexa, Kansas, "and although it may take a hit as the economy slumps, the performance level in the marine market rivals that of the race track. And as performance levels climb, so does the demand for quality

products that meet the intense demands of marine applications." And in that respect, "the marine market isn't too different from the automotive aftermarket," Powell mused. "People will find a way to race."

### **Big Dig**

Sharley pointed to the "lower start-up cost" for boat racing "when you remove the need for a paved track"—which makes the dedicated drag boat facility now under construction at the Lucas Oil Speedway in Wheatland, Missouri, a vote of confidence in the near future of boat racing.

According to the Speedway's Dan Robinson, the Lucas Drag Boat Strip will measure 4000 feet long and up to 400 feet wide, with depths ranging from eight to 12 feet. The first event for the new facility is

# MARINE



Photo courtesy of Mark Sharley/ULHRA.

***Purchasing new, upgraded components, rebuilding engines, and investing in existing equipment overall is what is driving the marine racing market, and bringing in continuing sales.***

By John F. Katz

scheduled for September 4–5, 2010.

Robinson sees the new Drag Boat Strip as a logical extension of—and showcase for—the newly formed Lucas Oil Drag Boat Racing Series, itself an alliance of the International Hot Boat Association (IHBA), Southern Drag Boat Association (SDBA), St. Louis Drag Boat Association (SLDBA), Columbia Drag Boat Association (CDBA), and Kentucky Drag Boat Association (KDBA), which unites approximately 900 teams from across the country under a single rule-book. Forty-six events are scheduled for 2010 in 10 states.

### Charting A Course

The marine performance market is large and diverse. Some divisions seem to be



not many racers can afford to run these elite programs, so the most popular boats to campaign are in the grassroots index classes." Compared to the blown-Hemi-powered Top Fuel and Top Alcohol machines, the index classes encompass "a wide array of engine designs, from blown to unblown, with or without nitrous.

**The performance level in the marine market rivals that of the race track. And as performance levels climb, so does the demand for quality products that meet the intense demands of marine applications. And in that respect, "the marine market isn't too different from the automotive aftermarket," said one contact, adding, "people will find a way to race." Photo courtesy of *Drag Boat Review*.**

# MARKET

## STEADY COURSE TO SALES

faring better than others—and which divisions are faring better can depend on whom you ask. "Powerboat racing is a niche market," said Sherron Winer, of the Powerboat Superleague in New Martinsville, West Virginia. But it embraces a broad range of machinery, "from Large Unlimited Hydroplanes (think Miss Budweiser) that use jet-turbine engines from helicopters; to the offshore groups, both stern drive and outboard; through the inboard category with automotive power; to Outboard Performance Craft (OPC); and the small stock, mod, and pro boats that use a variety of outboard engines from the US, Europe, and Japan."

"The race fans definitely want to see the nitro-burning Top Fuel Hydros," added Beverly Stokes, of *Drag Boat Review* in Eufaula, Oklahoma, "because they are obviously the most exciting to watch. Next to Top Fuel, the Top Alcohol Hydro, and Flatbottom classes are favored for their impressive speed and agility. But

And the seven-second Pro Mod class, which primarily uses blown Chevy or Ford combinations, is really gaining in popularity with racers and fans alike."

The American Power Boat Association (APBA) of Eastpointe, Michigan, claims to be the largest sanction in the world—reckoned by both its 4500 members and 200 annual events—as well as the US authority for the Monaco-based Union Internationale Motonautique (UIM). At the very top of its roster are the Large Unlimited Hydroplanes, representing only "about a dozen teams, all with millions of dollars invested," said Mark Weber. But APBA also sanctions at least eight other categories, from offshore to drag boats to personal watercraft. There's even a vintage and historic division, and a "Special Events" category: "If you think you have the fastest bass boat with a 225," Weber explained, "we'll validate your record run." Per-event participation dropped by about 20 percent in 2009, although "membership held. The racers

joined and participated; they just didn't go to as many races."

"Boat racing is very segmented—like the automotive side," agreed Scott Price, of Hardin Marine in Palm Coast, Florida. "Drag racing is growing in popularity, while offshore racing has seen a decline due to its higher costs." As a result, many offshore racers "are converting to poker-run type events;" in fact, "the fastest-growth segment is the poker run scene. These for-fun types of events are drawing the most exotic of boats. Many are basically full-on race boats with open canopies and horsepower numbers as high as 3000. Among events that run for bragging rights, we've seen speed trials where 32- to 44-foot open-cockpit boats run in excess of 175 mph."

Jack McInnis, of Dart Machinery in Troy, Michigan, rates offshore as "still the most popular form of boat competition today"—but in that statement he includes "the poker run usually held a couple of days before the racing starts.

This will bring in over 100 boats on a single weekend." Even so, boat counts can be deceptive: "Boat counts per event went up in 2009 because there were fewer events. We'll have to wait and see what happens in 2010."

And according to Ian Hawkins, of Ilmor High Performance Marine of Plymouth, Michigan, even the poker-run segment is down 60 percent from the boom times of just a couple of years ago. "The boats burn 90–200 gallons of fuel per hour," he noted, "so it takes money to run them."

"Boat counts in 2009 were predictably off, probably by at least one third," confirmed Mike Tomlinson, of the Offshore Super Series (OSS) in Bedford, Texas. "There have been very few new race boats built over the last two years, and not many upgrades, either. Most racers are business owners, and a lot of them had to stay home last year and mind the business. Also, sponsors pulled back spon-

sorships and several boats were unable to compete because of that. Probably one of the most detrimental things that happened to us was the loss of four races. Sponsorship dollars are also required to put on races, and as we all know, sponsorship and advertising budgets took a hit last year. Everyone is in survival mode."

Like Price, Tomlinson sees the brightest prospects in drag boat racing. "It's got a place for just about everybody—inboard, outboard, jet drive. There's been a resurgence of interest in the 'P' classes, like our Pro-Am. This is a run-what-you-brung category that allows nearly all boats to fit into a class and have a chance of winning. Pro-Am classes are governed by top speed or average lap speed, very similar to bracket racing."

The Offshore Powerboat Association (OPA) in Brick, New Jersey, saw "a total of 75 teams race with us in 2009," reported Ron Polli, "but only 22 of them attended

every race. The rest ran just in their local events. This gave us an average boat count of 42 teams per event. We expect that to grow in 2010 as some new boats are being built. We always have an influx of new teams starting out in our smaller classes. Some of the larger spec-class boats have made a commitment to race with OPA for 2010, so we'll accommodate them, too.

"OPA was founded on the idea of keeping the cost of racing down to a minimum," Polli continued, "and catering to the smaller-class boats, which have proven time and time again to be the backbone of the sport. For this reason, we've developed a rulebook that focuses on six speed bracket classes that start at 60 mph and go up to 115 mph. This allows for boats with different engines and hull configurations to race against each other in a competitive manner. Some hulls are better in calm water, and others are

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better in ocean conditions, so throughout a season, it all works out and the teams have a blast racing against each other for the year-end, high-point championship. What also makes these classes popular is a rulebook that hasn't changed in five years. And while we've lowered costs, we've raised our purse from \$25,000 to \$35,000 per race, and we have a few sites for 2010 that will be offering a \$50,000 purse. We run from Maryland to New York on the East Coast, as well as in the Great Lakes Region. For 2010, we plan to add a race or two down south. So it should be a good year for us."

"Hydroplanes, offshore, and drag boats," Sharley summarized. "Loud and fast are always the most popular. The stock classes and smaller boats do not make the crowd stand up like the fast, noisy boats. Offshore boats are bigger, very beautiful—and run in the ocean, which makes it difficult for fans to watch

the entire race. Drag boats cater to the 'gear heads' and appeal to people familiar with automotive drag racing. We've found that the drag boat audience is receptive to hydroplane racing, for a number of reasons. It's another form of racing entertainment, and it lasts for five laps instead of five seconds. The two forms of marine motorsports can present complementary programs to a combined audience at a shared venue."

The Powerboat Superleague sanctions mainly OPC machines. "We run tunnel boats," explained Winer, "small catamaran-type hulls with outboard marine engines originally built by Mercury High Performance and Evinrude/Johnson (OMC). Similar to circle track racing, we run a short, rectangular course directly in front of the fans. Some events were status quo" in 2009, "and some were wildly popular. We did not see a dramatic downturn in participation, but then



While the professional classes are what draw spectators to the race events, the most popular boats to campaign are in the grassroots index classes, reported one contact. Another notable component of the marine market is the poker run segment. The marine performance market is large and diverse, but some divisions seem to be faring better than others, so just as with auto racing, if you decide to sell to this market, visit local events to find out what classes are faring better than others, and how your racing establishment can cater to these racers' parts needs. Photo courtesy of OPA.

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**Staying Afloat**

Whatever the uncertainties of the market, said Polli, "the service part of the industry is doing fairly well. We don't see many new hulls being built for racing these days, but our teams do a really good job of recycling older race boats. As for engines, I would use the word rebuild rather than upgrade. Most of the OPA teams will rebuild the engine over the winter and then just make repairs as needed throughout the season."

"The best opportunities are probably in the service industry," agreed Tomlinson. "We don't see a lot of new construction for a while, especially in offshore. But there

is a definite need for people to keep their boats running."

Price said, "The recession has created a near feeding frenzy in the used-boat market, with used boats and repo's selling at record lows. This has helped the refurbishing business quite a bit." At the same time, "racers are stretching the boats they have. The desire to go faster still burns bright, and racers are still making equipment upgrades. Cubic inches is the name of the game, so new rebuilds, rotating assemblies, cylinder heads, and exhaust systems are strong sellers."

Hardin provides "the 'marine-ization' products to turn an automotive performance engine into a river or marine performance engine. "We are the crossover connection that provides the components that allow an automotive engine builder to service a marine clientele. We offer everything from motor mounts to cooling systems, bellhousings, the

list goes on."

"New boat sales are down over 60 percent," added McInnis. "Boaters are keeping their boats longer, and they will spend \$40,000-\$60,000 to rebuild engines and upgrade hardware, instead of \$400,000-\$900,000 on a new boat. Those upgrades may consist of new cylinder head packages, a turbocharger or supercharger, or a total rebuild for bigger power."

"Performance levels are increasing," Aeromotive's Powell noted, "therefore product quality is expected to keep pace. We have taken an entire line of performance automotive products, qualified them for marine use, and even certified them with the US Coast Guard. We changed the coatings to provide a quality, corrosion-resistant finish, to ensure performance in such a harsh environment. When it comes to marine fuel systems, there tends to be a lack of understanding

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that the entire system is just as critical as the fuel pump. More often than we'd like to see, the fuel pump is swapped out to meet the demands of the engine; but the rest of the system—that is, the filters, fuel line, pickup tube, etc.—are not upgraded to meet the demands of the new pump." The result can be "catastrophic."

Hawkins also sees opportunity in upgrading engines for people who, in better times, would be shopping for a new boat. Ilmor builds a marine V10 based on the Dodge Viper engine, in 550-, 650-, and 725-horsepower versions. "We custom paint them and try to make them as individual as we can," Hawkins noted, "to make them look like one-off show engines. We race them in Europe in the UIM. Last year, we were Super Sport champions. We like to say that we don't build race engines, but we race the engines we build.

"But we also take the old engines,

refurbish and re-sell them, and we sell higher-power engines in their place," he continued. "There are lots of entry-level people fishing for used engines." And even "entry-level" has been re-defined: "It used to be 500–600 horsepower; now they are buying 300–400 horsepower just to get into a boat." Meanwhile, experienced boaters will trade in a 500-horsepower engine for a 700-horsepower engine—"where before they would have just bought a brand-new 700-horsepower boat. It forces you to focus on your customer service, to make sure your service is top-notch, so you keep the customers you have. You make them your stars. You follow them around—while you chase every lead, every job you can get."

Similar to the auto racing market, people aren't being as frivolous with their money in the powerboat racing market either, noted George Pataki from ARS Marine in Fox Lake, Illinois. "We're getting

a lot of restoration jobs of older boats because they don't have the money to spend on a brand new boat, and we can rebuild their old one and restore it and everything to today's hot rod standards," he explained.

ARS Marine primarily works on hot rod jet boats. "We get a lot of jet pump work, we do motors, fiberglass work, and everything all the way down to the trailer. Some of the older boats, the wood floors are rotted out so we cut all that out and replace it with new stuff," Pataki said.

"These days you need to be well diversified," he added. "That's about the best thing to do in the hot rod boat area. Whether it be fiberglass work or welding or engine building, you've got to be able to do it all. That's the only way I think you can be profitable right now."

Gale Banks Engineering of Azusa, California, is looking to the future with an emphasis on high-performance marine

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diesels. "Due in part to the slowdown in high-performance recreational boat sales," said Matt Hill, "we have focused our efforts on government applications, where there is still a strong interest in high-performance diesel engines to meet ever-more-difficult mission objectives. This effort will lead directly to improvements in recreational products through testing in extreme-duty applications well beyond what most boaters would ever face. We already see quite a bit of interest from domestic builders who need a high-performance, responsive diesel for the export market. Our sequential Super-Turbo marine diesel, which will be available in 2010, meets this need with more than 800 hp available."


#### Full Speed Ahead

In the meantime, however, today's spark-ignition marine racers "look for reliable power," said Polli. "Since we run bracket classes, most of the motors are



According to those interviewed, while purchases of new boats may be down right now due to the economy, this provides an increased sales opportunity to those who offer services to the marine market, particularly with engine rebuilds. One contact explained, "Racers are stretching the boats they have. The desire to go faster still burns bright, and racers are still making equipment upgrades. Cubic inches is the name of the game, so new rebuilds, rotating assemblies, cylinder heads, and exhaust systems are strong sellers." Photo courtesy of Offshore Super Series Powerboat Racing Association.

fairly mild, and will last a season with only minor maintenance between races. Offshore racing has always been the ultimate proving ground for new technology and some of our teams will try anything to get a small advantage. Props, engines, steering systems, communications systems, and even onboard telemetry" are all hot areas for development.

"All forms of boat racing will come back gradually," Tomlinson predicted. "We were hurt in '74 by the gas shortage, in the early '80s by high interest rates, and now by the recession/depression. It has always come back. As people get back on their feet and start making money again, the allure of fast boats and the challenge of piloting a race boat over a constantly changing surface will draw them back to the sport. Some of the race boats on the sideline now will be dusted off and brought back out, or sold to new competitors. It will get better." 



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